

Caught In The Crossfire:
Australian and Asia-Pacific Responses to the Changing Nature of War

Dr Stewart Woodman
Professor
School of Humanities and Social Sciences
University of New South Wales

The views expressed in this and other papers associated with the NIC 2020 project are those of individual participants. They are posted for discussion purposes only and do not represent the views of the US Government.

**Caught In The Crossfire:
Australian and Asia-Pacific Responses to the Changing Nature of War**

**Dr Stewart Woodman
Professor
School of Humanities and Social Sciences
University of New South Wales**

Just a decade ago, one could have been forgiven for thinking that the Asia-Pacific region was on the doorstep of a new era of conventional, high-technology warfare. The euphoria of post-Cold War security cooperation and proclamations of a ‘new world order’ had dimmed amid evidence of continuing arms acquisitions and recognition that jockeying for position among the major powers was likely to determine the future strategic landscape.

Australia’s 1994 Defence White Paper pondered, with more than a hint of nostalgia, the more fluid and complex environment that had replaced the stability imposed by the Cold War. Rapid economic growth and greater technological depth were substantially increasing the ‘capacity of most countries in Asia to buy or build modern defence equipment, and operate it effectively’.¹ There was a distinct shift from internal to external security priorities. The range of military options available to nations was widening as was the potential scale and intensity of conflict.

For Australia, those concerns did not abate. Its 1997 Review noted that the spread of high technology capabilities meant that the ‘traditional assumption that our forces will have an automatic technological edge over others in the region is no longer plausible’.² There was a concern that, amid continued regional growth, the decline in Australia’s relative

¹ *Defending Australia, Defence White Paper 1994*, Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra, 1994, p.9

² Department of Defence, *Australia’s Strategic Policy*, Defence Publications 29785/97, Canberra, 1997, p.47

Discussion paper -- does not represent the views of the US Government

economic standing would ultimately undermine the nation's capacity to defend itself. Only by exploiting the 'knowledge edge' offered by the emerging revolution in military affairs could Australia continue to provide for its defence in a cost effective manner.

Yet the reality of both conflict and force structure development has been very different to those prognoses. While tensions have continued to simmer in relation to both Taiwan and the Korean peninsula, the dynamics of confrontation have shifted significantly towards ballistic missile proliferation, possession of weapons of mass destruction, and theatre missile defence. China's quest for military modernisation remains at a fundamental stage with a more streamlined force and greater military professionalism seen as necessary prerequisites for future progress. The litmus test for Japan's re-emergence as a 'normal' state has been its preparedness to commit the Self Defence Force to international peace operations.

Progress in Southeast Asia has traversed a similar rocky road. The Asian Financial Crisis of 1997 severely dented economic development, producing a suspension in defence acquisitions. Significant domestic instability in both Indonesia and the Philippines has delayed progress in transforming their armed forces towards more professional militaries with advanced capabilities for external defence. Apart from support for internal stability operations and counter terrorism, the primary operational commitments have been to peace operations in East Timor. Unrest in Bougainville and Solomon Islands has seen the deployment of Australian, New Zealand and South Pacific nation troops.

What these operations have revealed are some significant limitations on the ability of smaller to middle-size Asia-Pacific nations to exploit more advanced defence capabilities effectively. Planning horizons are short. Equipment is acquired as individual platforms rather than based on a holistic view of deliverable capability. The continuing primacy of the individual services means that joint planning, command and doctrine are frequently non-existent. Logistic support and maintenance are limited, affecting the ability to sustain

Discussion paper -- does not represent the views of the US Government

operations, and training constrained. Peace operations in East Timor confirmed that interoperability was only possible at a quite low level.³

Outside Japan, only Singapore and China appear to have the ability or the size to take advantage of the significant changes heralded by the revolution in military affairs. For Singapore, its technological sophistication as a nation and advanced military capabilities, together with the vulnerabilities imposed by small size and lack of strategic depth, make a powerful case for the greater transparency and control proffered by the Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA). Special attention is being paid to the development of C⁴I, enhanced surveillance and air defence capabilities.

Taking advantage of advances in information systems and precision strike technologies will be key to future SAF development. “Superior numbers of platforms such as tanks, new planes and ships”, Singapore’s defence policy notes, “will become less of an advantage unless all these platforms can be integrated into a unified, flexible and effective fighting system using advanced information technologies.”⁴ The new emphasis on battlespace awareness and digitised C⁴I seeks to enhance the speed and precision of military manoeuvre. In pursuing this objective, Singapore has the advantage of a strong indigenous technological capability.

Apart from Malaysia, none of Singapore’s neighbours have the capacity to emulate that sophistication in conventional warfare except in the much longer term. Outside the peninsular, future warfare in Southeast Asia will continue to be dominated by low intensity conflicts ranging from cross border incursions, terrorism and internal dissent with the possible introduction of medium to longer range ballistic missile systems as the main wild card. Introduction of the latter would significantly destabilise the Southeast Asian strategic landscape. The limited spread of chemical and biological weapons is possible in the context of global terrorism but is unlikely to shape interstate relations.

³ Alan Ryan, ‘Primary Responsibilities and Primary Risks’, *Australian Defence Force Participation in the International Force East Timor*, Study Paper No. 304, Land Warfare Studies Centre, Canberra, November 2000.

⁴ Ministry of Defence, *Defending Singapore in the 21st Century*, Singapore, 2000, p.10

Discussion paper -- does not represent the views of the US Government

One possible catalyst for the introduction of more advanced conventional capabilities could be Chinese moves to transform the PLA through the introduction of RMA related technologies and the adoption of a more proactive defence strategy. Early PLA interest in the potential for new technologies to transform the nature of warfare was certainly galvanised by the overwhelming superiority displayed by US forces in the 1991 Gulf War. Chinese planners have identified the advantages of a more proactive strategy providing greater strategic depth, of precision strike with stand-off capabilities, and of smaller, more mobile forces integrated through enhanced information technologies.⁵

The jury is still out, however, on the practicalities of and timescales for transforming the PLA. China does have powerful incentives including great power recognition vis-à-vis the US, the capacity to reintegrate Taiwan by force if necessary, and longer term rivalry with Japan. However, the extent of change required is daunting. The necessary preconditions of streamlining and professionalising the force, developing a much higher technology research and industrial base, bolstering political support for substantial resource expenditure, and above all introducing a culture of more flexible and innovative thinking will take decades – and even then may well not be achievable.⁶

A significant development in China's ability to project advanced conventional forces, while of concern to other regional countries, would be most unlikely to lead to a response in kind. While some capability enhancements might be anticipated to protect specific interests, particularly in surveillance, air defence and maritime patrol, China's neighbours (apart from Japan and perhaps Russia) are not positioned to respond comprehensively. They lack the comparative national resources, industrial and educational infrastructure and, for the foreseeable future, most armed forces will be unable to turn their backs on the demands of national development and domestic stability.

⁵ You Ji, "The Revolution in Military Affairs and the Evolution of China's Strategic Thinking", *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, December 1999, Vol. 21, Iss. 3, pp.344ff

⁶ Paul Dibb, *Force Modernisation in Asia: Towards 2000 and Beyond*, SDSC Working Paper o. 306, ANU, Canberra, 1997, pp.10-11

Discussion paper -- does not represent the views of the US Government

Apart from limited contributions to a major power coalition, asymmetric warfare capabilities are likely to offer the only alternative for middle powers to respond. Yet, with the possible exception of intermediate range missiles and information warfare, even those options are constrained by the national capacity to develop, deploy and support such weapons. For most, planning for future war will continue to be an uneasy, and often not articulated, balance between the immediate demands of stability operations, border protection and counter-terrorism and the acquisition of selected, more technologically advanced platforms for specific purposes. New operational concepts are likely to be largely confined to the tactical environment.

Now, in the context of traditional defence planning, that assessment may appear rather too sanguine. Outside the specific dynamics of Northeast Asia, there is no realistic vision of a significant conventional conflict drawing on the emerging advanced technologies. It is not that some more advanced platforms will not be acquired. Economic growth is likely to provide some shiny new toys to park on the end of the runway. Rather, it is the quantum leap in planning, integration and whole of capability approaches (so central to those new forms of warfare) that will take generations to overcome. China's prolonged and currently unrewarding quest to develop an aircraft carrier capability is a chastening insight into the magnitude of the task presented by any such transformation.

Perhaps the most pertinent litmus test for the shape of future conflict and defence planning priorities in the Asia-Pacific is Australia. A developed nation with technologically advanced forces, comprehensive planning processes and a member of the Western strategic community, Australia is also the Asia-Pacific nation with the most significant and varied exposure to conflict in recent years. Deployments have stretched from East Timor, Solomon Islands and Bougainville through to Afghanistan, the Persia Gulf and Iraq.

Where the Australian experience is fascinating is that it reveals two distinct and, in many respects, competing imperatives. The first is the lure of technology. As a geographically large nation with a numerically small defence force, Australia has long been concerned

Discussion paper -- does not represent the views of the US Government

with how to maintain a technological edge relative to potential regional competitors. However, despite the impressive display of nascent RMA capabilities in the 1991 Gulf War, resource pressures, the euphoria of enhanced regional cooperation, and a quite tight strategic focus on continental defence constrained early enthusiasm to embrace the new technologies.

Rapid economic development in East and Southeast Asia, recognition that the major regional powers would increasingly shape the strategic environment, and the broader strategic ambitions of the new Liberal-National Party Government were soon to change this emphasis. The 1997 Strategic Review pushed the RMA into the spotlight. With capability margins narrowing, the exploitation of information technologies and precision strike were seen as the key to both battlespace awareness and to providing an unparalleled degree of precision and effectiveness in destroying targets. Privileged access to the US underpinned this 'knowledge edge'.⁷

An Office of the RMA was created, robust alternative future scenarios were developed and wargamed, and future war fighting concepts explored. "(T)he ability to increase vastly the speed and capacity to collect, organize, store, process, tailor and distribute information", the Defence 2000 White Paper assessed, was the most important development changing the conduct of war.⁸ Continuous real-time surveillance over Australia's northern approaches was to be complemented by integrated and more flexible C³I systems, new command structures and a single, integrated command support system. Within the Defence Capability Plan, 'knowledge edge' capabilities became the first priority.

For Australia, the concept had a strongly maritime emphasis. Military strategy adopted a more proactive stance, extending beyond defence of the sea and air approaches to strategic strikes against forward operating bases in the northern archipelago. While the acquisition of AEW&C aircraft was the immediate priority, the greater continuity of

⁷ *Australia's Strategic Policy*, pp.55-57

⁸ *Defence 2000, Our Future Defence Force*, Defence Publishing Service OCT010/2000, Canberra, 2000, p.108

Discussion paper -- does not represent the views of the US Government

coverage provided by space-based systems and UAVs was firmly on the agenda. Long range stand-off strike weapons were to be acquired for the F-111s but the potential of very long range Tomahawk land-attack cruise missiles deferred⁹ – not least, one suspects, because of its potentially destabilising impact on the region. The ability to contribute to coalition in high intensity conflicts further afield was an important by-product for the Coalition Government.

In the real world of operations, the script did not go exactly to plan. An influx of illegal refugees saw maritime assets and the Special Air Service deployed to combat organised people smuggling in the north western approaches. The dramatic events following the East Timorese vote for independence from Indonesia in 1999 saw Australia vaulted into leadership of the multi-national coalition to restore order and provide a stable environment for the establishment of the new government. With the collapse of central government authority in Solomon Islands, the ADF was deployed to support the police in disarming the rival groups, bringing rebel leaders to justice, and rebuilding the institutions of central government. The Bougainville secession movement in Papua New Guinea simmered in the background.

In contrast to the high tech agenda of the RMA, this second imperative was very much about boots on the ground. And those commitments very quickly revealed some real limitations on Australia's planning. Without a recent Government decision to enhance Army readiness, the ADF would simply not have been able to respond at short notice with a force of sufficient size to accomplish the task. Moves to streamline and civilianise combat support over the past decades in the interests of resource efficiency had left the ADF ill-equipped to deploy and sustain a significant force element at short notice beyond the reach of the national infrastructure.

If faced with significant resistance or a higher tempo of operations, the success of the Timor deployment would have been by no means assured. The comprehensive, operational-level command arrangements developed for the defence of Australia were

⁹ *Ibid*, p.93

Discussion paper -- does not represent the views of the US Government

largely bypassed. Sustainment of the commitment was only possible by significant reliance on Reserve force elements, a step requiring legislative amendments and shifting the role of those forces from longer term mobilisation to a shorter term surge capability. The demand for readily deployable capabilities undermined the previous luxury of having units and platforms “fitted for but not with” particular systems or capacities.¹⁰

The dilemma created by these competing imperatives was clearly evident in the public discussion paper that preceded the Defence 2000 White Paper. If Australia wanted to maintain other war-fighting capabilities at a reasonably high level, then enhancement of peacekeeping activities would require increases in longer-term funding. Even then, it was likely that some capabilities would need to be reduced to maintain funding within fiscally realistic bounds.¹¹

In consequence, the Government committed itself to a significant injection of additional funding. The decline in personnel numbers was to be reversed. Six battalion groups were to be held “at no more than 90 days notice to move, and most at 30 days or less”. Additional troop lift helicopters were to be provided, the ADF’s amphibious lift capability retained at three major ships, and new medium lift aircraft acquired to replace the ageing Caribous. The readiness of the Logistic Support Force was enhanced together with its transport, water and fuel supply capacities. ‘Information capability’, the first priority in 1997, was the last capability area mentioned in Defence 2000.¹²

Any expectation that an effective and sustainable balance had been achieved between the immediate demands of stability operations and longer term force development incorporating advanced technologies collapsed with the attacks of September 11. The invasion of Afghanistan and the subsequent war against Iraq saw Australian Special Forces, air combat and surveillance elements, and specialist combat support capabilities deployed to support the War against Terror. Naval frigates continued to patrol the Persia Gulf, primarily for maritime interception operations. At home a Special Forces Command

¹⁰ *Defence 2000, Our Future Defence Force*, pp.53-57, 69-70

¹¹ Department of Defence, *Defence Review 2000 – Our Future Defence Force, A Public Discussion Paper*, Defence Publications 38459/2000, Canberra, June 2000, pp.54-55

¹² *Defence 2000, Our Future Defence Force*, pp.77-97

Discussion paper -- does not represent the views of the US Government

was established, counter-terrorist capabilities upgraded, and Reserve Forces given primary responsibility for supporting the police in responding to a terrorist incident.¹³ The Bali bombings enshrined global terrorism at the top of Australia's security agenda.

At the heart of Australia's concerns, reflected in its 2003 Defence Update, was the potentially deadly confluence between the global reach of terrorism, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (including to non-state actors), and the opportunities offered to terrorists and transnational criminal groups by the growing incidence of instability and possible state failure throughout the islands to the north and east.¹⁴ The new threats left in tatters the geo-strategic depth that, apart from the prospect of a nuclear exchange during the Cold War, had previously constrained the prospect of a potentially devastating attack. Weighing the advantages of strategic pre-emption to thwart such asymmetric threats added a sharp edge to Australia's regional posture.

The challenge for a middle power in the Asia-Pacific preparing for future conflict is thus extremely daunting. There is a very wide spectrum of current or potential conflicts. Its range and diversity is such that relative importance and priority cannot be ordered according to traditional criteria such as timescales, likelihood, proximity or magnitude. Short competes with longer term, conventional with asymmetric, neighbourhood stability with global terrorism, quality and technology with quantity and sustainment, coalition with independent, state sponsored with non-state actors, external defence with homeland security.

Amid these competing demands, choices will have to be made. The agenda is simply too broad to be attempted by any but the major powers. With the current uncertainty providing few leads, it is those choices rather than any predictions of possible power balances or emerging threats that will determine the nature of future conflict in the region. While that conclusion may appear unexceptionable, it is particularly pertinent

¹³ Minister for Defence, 'New Special Operations Command', Media Release, 5 May 2003, <http://www.minister.defence.gov.au/Hilltpl.cfm?CurrentId=2689>

¹⁴ *Australia's National Security, A Defence Update 2003*, Defence Publications NOV010/02, Canberra, 2003.

Discussion paper -- does not represent the views of the US Government

because the region is facing a potentially fundamental transition in the relationship between military force and the state.

There is increasingly a crisis of national capacity relative to the established benchmarks of conventional defence of territory against armed attack. Alternative systems for strategic balancing and if necessary engagement, previously the preserve of the superpowers, are now available to a much wider range of players, including potentially to non-state actors. There has also been a quite dramatic compression of strategic time. It is not simply a question of shortened acquisition times for asymmetric capabilities and the collapse of the traditional warning indicators for strategic power projection. Perhaps the greatest challenge, as the last decade has demonstrated graphically, is the capacity of the post-Cold War environment to fluctuate rapidly – much faster than the ability of defence decision-makers to transform the force structure.

For some, the choice has already been made. Resource pressures and the difficulty of identifying a direct and compelling strategic focus have seen New Zealand disband its air combat capability.¹⁵ Amid the disappointment and critical commentary, the compelling arguments were simple. It was a choice between breadth and depth and between longer term insurance and more immediate stability management. Even with an enhanced resource allocation, that decision would still almost certainly have had to be made. It was a shift, as the UK's Strategic Defence Review put so neatly in 1997, moving 'from stability based on fear to stability based on the active management of these risks'.¹⁶

For others, the imperative of state survival whether from internal dissent, cross border challenges or terrorism is compelling. Indonesia's 1997 Defence White Paper set out comprehensive strategy for defence of the archipelago, including regional security cooperation, a layered strategy of external defence and ultimately 'Total People's

¹⁵ New Zealand Ministry of Defence, A Modern, Sustainable Defence Force Matched to New Zealand's Needs, 8 May 2001 available at http://www.defence.govt.nz/public_docs/Gov-Def-Stat-8May2001-contentspage.shtml

¹⁶ Ministry of Defence, *Strategic Defence Review*, July 1998, <http://www.mod.uk/issues/sdr/approach.htm> pp.1-2 (downloaded 3/10/2003)

Discussion paper -- does not represent the views of the US Government

Resistance'.¹⁷ With the instability accompanying the introduction of democracy, the Asian Financial Crisis, and the new transnational challenges, that vision barely rates a mention. Operations other than war, including domestic stability and transnational challenges, dominate a revised defence policy.¹⁸

For several other Southeast Asian countries, the prognosis is little different. Over time they may well acquire some more advanced platforms but these will almost certainly be limited to specific tasks including air defence and the protection of maritime areas. They lack the resources to develop comprehensive conventional capabilities for national defence, to project traditional combat power, and to integrate those capabilities into even a rudimentary form of network warfare. That situation is unlikely to change as the cost and complexity of modern systems continue to rise and the short term demands of development and national stability dominate the policy agenda.

Faced with any significant security challenge, the appeal and the affordability of what are currently termed asymmetric warfare capabilities will be their only option. Conventional platforms will continue to provide a limited deterrence and first line response capability but it is at the point of escalation that the most dramatic change will occur. Not only will the shift be from systems that are tactical to strategic in their impact but, because the tools of engagement are potentially so different on either side of the threshold, any escalation will be difficult to predict and to manage.

The critical question is whether that vision of future conflict is confined to the smaller Asia-Pacific nations and those facing immediate difficulty or has much wider significance. Here, Australia's planning again offers some valuable insights, poised as it is neatly (or is it precariously?) between competing visions of high-tech war and an uncomfortable admixture of non-conventional challenges.

¹⁷ *The Policy of the State Defence and Security of the Republic of Indonesia 1997*, Jakarta, May 1997,

¹⁸ *Defending the Country Entering the 21st Century*, Ministry of Defence, Jakarta, March 2003, pp.45-59

Discussion paper -- does not represent the views of the US Government

The planning effort that Australia has committed to understanding future conflict, particularly in the context of guiding force structure development, is difficult to fault. It has embarked upon an extensive series of studies of alternative futures, sought to articulate a comprehensive military strategy which captures all the current and prospective challenges to the nation's security, undertaken extensive simulation and war gaming to test concepts and develop skills, and produced a detailed, long-term capability plan.¹⁹

There are two key elements to that response. First, planners have projected twenty years forward to the force after next, simply leapfrogging the fog of the immediate future. The resultant Force 2020²⁰ and Future Warfighting Concept²¹ construct an appealing concept of multidimensional manoeuvre warfare. Together they envisage the ADF as a seamless force with network enabled operations underpinned by a common, real time battlespace picture and 'decision superiority'.

“... the ADF will aim to deploy robust forces from secure bases against the adversary's most exposed vulnerabilities, with such speed and simultaneity that the adversary can neither interfere with our operations nor effectively develop their own.”²²

While multidimensional manoeuvre is directly primarily at the warlike end of the contingency spectrum, it is seen as an approach that would be adaptable to other operations.

More immediately, Australia's defence planners have adopted several key assumptions to guide planning in the shorter term. Australia, they believe, simply cannot afford two different forces to undertake stability operations and conventional warfare. While forces

¹⁹ See Michael Evans, *Australia and the Revolution in Military Affairs*, Working Paper No.115, Land Warfare Studies Centre, August 2001.

²⁰ *Force 2020*, Department of Defence, Canberra, June 2002 available at <http://www.defence.gov.au/publications/f2020.pdf>

²¹ *Future Warfighting Concept*, Department of Defence, Canberra, December 2002 available at <http://www.defence.gov.au/publications/fwc.pdf>

²² *Ibid*, p.33

Discussion paper -- does not represent the views of the US Government

equipped for high level conflict will be able to handle lesser tasks, that judgment is not true in reverse. There was certainly a strong belief out of the experience of East Timor that possessing a demonstrable warfighting capacity was instrumental in achieving early success. The operational level of war is enjoying a resurgence of popularity as the vehicle for implementing a network centric approach. Concepts of a balanced force and of combined arms warfare are seen to provide the flexibility to respond to a diverse range of contingencies.

But does that vision really hold up to scrutiny? Significant questions have already begun to be raised about the affordability of the Defence Capability Plan. The Kinnaird review of defence procurement expressed considerable concern about the underestimation of the costs of new equipment. Current operations continue to put pressure on personnel and logistics. The outcomes of the Defence Capability Review announced in November 2003 include the early retirement of several major platforms, reducing ADF capabilities in the shorter term at least.²³ Australia, like Japan, has also committed itself to supporting the United States in exploring the possibility of developing a theatre missile defence system for the region. Concern about missile proliferation is an issue that has been lurking in the shadows of Australia's defence planning for a decade but is only now beginning to slip into the spotlight.

Importantly, the question is not simply one of current budget levels. During the last decade, the ADF has exhausted virtually all its traditional tools of national mobilisation simply to sustain lower level peace operations in its immediate neighbourhood. Civil support for defence extends right through into the area of operations while Reserve forces are being pushed closely to the boundaries of acceptability by the twin demands of readiness and sustainability. While there is some disquiet within Army about the apparently privileged treatment being given to the special forces, the Chief of Army has raised the prospect of the ground forces overall having to introduce special force

²³ Aldo Borgu, *The Defence Capability Review 2003, A Modest and Incomplete Review*, ASPI Strategic Insight, December 2003, Australian Strategic Policy Institute, Canberra, 2003, pp.1-12

Discussion paper -- does not represent the views of the US Government

characteristics by 2020.²⁴ Decisions to pension off the F-111 strike aircraft earlier than anticipated and potential delays and cost overruns with the Joint Strike Fighter may well reopen the Tomahawk debate.

Despite the impressive comprehensiveness of Australia's vision of network centric warfare, there is no doubt that the gap between rhetoric and reality is growing. The commitments to preparedness and deployability for operations other than war are unlikely to abate in the immediate future. Not only are the fundamental causes of the instability deep-seated, but Australia's own domestic security and its regional leadership credentials could quickly be jeopardised by a failure to respond. The difficult choices will almost certainly fall on capabilities at the higher end of the conflict spectrum with the greater transparency that is available through the information revolution potentially encouraging a shift to longer range stand-off systems.

Australia too will thus be looking at the prospect of a differential force structure – of necessity managing current crises as the first priority, maintaining only selected capabilities for high level operations - usually in coalition, and with little choice other than to explore more exotic but cost effective options for strategic defence or power projection. Making such a change as a conscious choice will, however, not be easy. It would fundamentally affect the organisation and structure of the ADF. There would be concerns about the perceptions of both the United States and Australia's neighbours. Abandoning any major capability would attract adverse public comment.

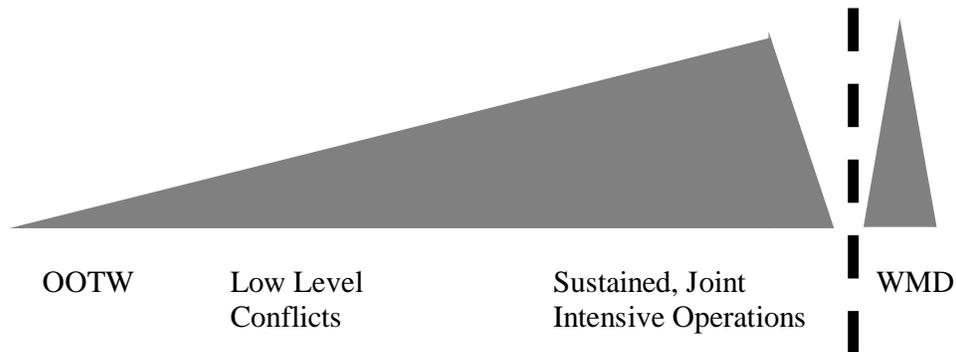
Both recent combat experience and the drivers of strategic change in the Asia-Pacific thus point to a fundamental shift in the profile of future conflict. While most developing nations had lacked the resources and planning maturity to realise the ideal, the underlying objective was the development of a balanced conventional force for the external defence of the nation against external aggression (see Diagram 1 below). Significant asymmetric

²⁴ John Kerin, “ ‘All-commando’ army planned”, <http://www.news.com.au/common/printpage/0.6093.8648219.00.html> (download 11/2/2004)

Discussion paper -- does not represent the views of the US Government

capabilities, particularly when linked to weapons of mass destruction, remained the province of the major powers and of rogue states largely ostracised from normal strategic interchange. A significant timeframe and substantial force development, with appropriate warning indicators, were generally necessary preconditions for strategic power projection.

Diagram 1: The Spectrum of Conflict



That profile of conflict is now under sustained attack. An unheralded casualty of the past decade has been the breakdown of the common template of military modernisation which analysts applied assiduously to explain future trends. While a competitive arms dynamic may continue in Northeast Asia and on the Malay peninsular, for most middle and smaller nations that agenda has slipped from the radar screen. Concerns about development, domestic stability and the forces of separatism, fanned by the impact of global terrorism and the new transnational challenges, command priority. Those short term priorities, together with limited available resources, will overwhelm any prospect of introducing the longer term perspectives and capability programming necessary to pursue high-tech warfare in the 21st century.

That growing differential between nations has two fundamental consequences for the shape of future conflict in the Asia-Pacific region. First, not only is the nature of any confrontation or conflict likely to be quite specific to the area in which it occurs but the currently competing planning imperatives are likely to continue in parallel for the foreseeable future. Second, for those nations unable to bandwagon on the current

Discussion paper -- does not represent the views of the US Government

revolution in military technologies, asymmetric strategies will become increasingly attractive, and probably the only affordable alternative, for responding to any significant external military pressure.

For all but the largest powers or those like Singapore with a very concentrated strategic outlook, the likely implication is that the traditional continuum of conflict will collapse as a basis for defence planning. Their first priority will fall clearly at the lower end of the conflict spectrum, managing stability domestically or within their immediate neighbourhood. They will need to embrace a multitude of unconventional challenges presented by both state and non-state actors. Agility, speed of response, and light scales and cooperation with other agencies will be key characteristics but significant firepower, rather than shaping the force, will shift to a supporting role.

Such conventional operations as do occur will be limited in scale and duration and geographically contained. Maritime presence and border protection operations would be prime candidates. Contributions to more substantial conflict will only occur in the context of coalition operations and will be increasingly confined to support operations on the periphery. Expectations of any significant interoperability in an advanced network centric warfare environment would be low.

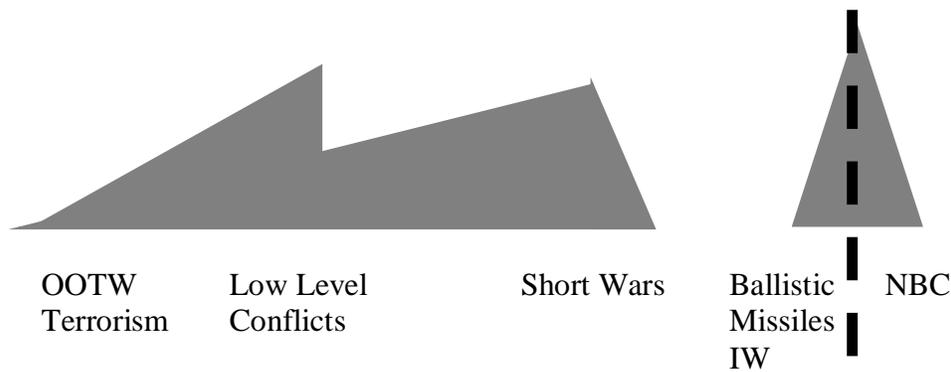
At the other end of the conflict spectrum, short term imperatives, resource constraints relative to the task, limited indigenous technological and industrial capacity, and a simple inability to keep pace with a rapidly evolving agenda will thwart any ambitions for a comprehensive advanced capability for conventional war. The increasing availability of alternative strategic weapons systems, particularly medium to longer range ballistic missiles, with substantially lesser acquisition times and support infrastructure, provides the opportunity to change priorities and ramp up national defence within much shorter timeframes.

These centrifugal forces point to the emergence of a distinct division within the traditional spectrum of conflict (see Diagram 2 below). Any major conventional

Discussion paper -- does not represent the views of the US Government

engagements will be in the context of coalition operations yet, without a clear agenda for longer term strategic alignments, these will not be the major determinants of independent national planning. That division in the spectrum of conflict is particularly important for two reasons. First, it significantly changes the timeframes applicable to conflict escalation and limits the ability of nations to control the level of force and its progression. Second, the division falls in the vary area of the conflict spectrum that has been the focus of the revolution in military affairs. It contradicts the recent resurgence of interest in the operational level of war.

Diagram 2: Conflict in the New Millennium



What is not clear is whether and in what timeframes individual regional countries may choose to embark upon such as course of their own volition or whether, given its potential impact, an external catalyst may be necessary. What is clear is that, in an environment of significant proliferation of missiles or other asymmetric capabilities with potential strategic impact, the region could become a very dangerous place. Strategic warning time would collapse, strategic geography would be greatly compressed, ambiguity would be rife as to presumed adversaries and targets, the perceived advantages of pre-emption would lower the threshold for conflict. Perhaps most importantly, the ability to control escalation from lower intensity confrontation could be thwarted by the press of a button.

Discussion paper -- does not represent the views of the US Government

Such a future would be most unlikely to evolve overnight. Responsible governments are aware of the sensitivities of opening such a Pandora's Box. Military organisations themselves are inherently conservative and, while prepared to tinker at the margins, are unlikely to quickly embrace an agenda when potentially undermines the rationale for much of their current structure and capabilities. The danger, however, is that the catalyst for such a change does not need to be the emergence of a major threat.

Outside the current major power confrontations in Northeast and South Asia, the simple acquisition of a non-conventional strategic strike capability, a ballistic missile defence system or, as Iraq has demonstrated, UAVs with indeterminate payloads could very quickly open the floodgates. The sensitivities of pre-emptive strategies or capability acquisitions, even as part of a considered response to an asymmetric challenge from a non-state actor, can themselves release new strategic dynamics. Setting aside the question of cost, all-encompassing 2020 visions will be of limited value should the ambiguity and potential for surprise that makes the response to global terrorism so difficult be transferred to the state on state arena.

The shape of future conflict in the Asia-Pacific is thus there to be made. How it evolves and within what timeframes will depend very much on the choices that middle powers make. There is considerable inherent resistance, both political and military, albeit sometimes as much from loyalty to the past as awareness of the potential pitfalls ahead, to the emerging drivers of change. Yet, continued proliferation of asymmetric capabilities together with the growing power differential between nations (even within sub-regions) could dramatically change the strategic landscape within a relatively short timeframe. Should that occur, the core of the challenge for most nations will not be how to maximise control of the conventional battlespace but how effectively it is able to come to terms with discontinuity in the spectrum of conflict.